

Class Act

Peter Konwitschny's schoolroom 'Lohengrin' augurs well for Leipzig, suggests Mark Berry

Stefan Vinke (Lohengrin), Gun-Brit Barkmin (Elsa), Hans-Joachim Ketelsen (Friedrich von Telramund), Gabriele Schnaut (Ortrud), James Moellenhoff (King Henry), Jürgen Kurth (Herald), Tommaso Randazzo, Timothy Fallon, Tomas Möwes, Miklós Sebestyén (Brabantine Nobles), Hitomi Okuzumi, Haike Hauptmann, Cornelia Röser, Claudia Schwarzmann (Pages), Lukas Vinke (Gottfried); Leipzig Opera Chorus (chorus master: Sören Eckhoff), Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra/Ulf Schirmer; Peter Konwitschny (director), Wolfgang Bücken (stage rehearsal), Helmut Brade (designer), Helmut Brade and Inga von Bredow (costumes). Leipzig Opera House, 18 December 2009

Peter Konwitschny's production of *Lohengrin*, with its schoolroom setting, has become quite celebrated, but this revival in Leipzig, where Konwitschny has recently been appointed director of productions, provided a welcome opportunity for me to encounter it for the first time. It has many strengths, though there are sections, especially in the first part of the third act, which transfer less well to this setting. (A wedding is one thing, but preparations for a wedding night? Laying out of the marital bed is a strange form of sex education for what appears to be a rather old-fashioned kind of establishment, however universal the acclaim for Lohengrin as leader.) Clearly, someone who cavils at the very idea of relocating will immediately object here, but Konwitschny's production is not one of those translations to a Stevenage multi-storey car park for the sake of it.

Issues of leadership, exclusion, (forbidden) knowledge and sexual politics can be illuminated by this particular setting – and in many ways are. *Lord of the Flies* springs to mind more than once in the fickleness of the mob and the way it turns upon Telramund and Ortrud. Helmut Brade's designs and costumes, the latter in collaboration with Inga von Bredow, successfully evoke both conformity and individual characterisation.

Here, as much as in Stefan Herheim's superlative Berlin production, any black-and-white sense of 'rightness' concerning Lohengrin's cause is rendered untenable. Lohengrin's charismatic power is more potent than the traditional, legal forms pertaining to King Henry – it was unclear to me whether he was prefect, master, or something else – but it is inherently unstable. The road to 1933 is one of Konwitschny's concerns: a thorny issue, to put it mildly, but failing to address it at all leaves the way clear for those who misunderstand or misrepresent. There is something undeniably chilling in this context to hear the words with which Lohengrin introduces Gottfried: 'Seht da den Herzog von Brabant! Zum Führer sei er euch ernannt!' However, the appearance of a boy with a machine gun might go too far for some, arguably too far for the parameters of the production. What, after all, is the alternative? Ortrud? There were a good few boos for the production team at the end, though wild enthusiasm was more common.

The production has lighter touches, wittier than one might have expected. Whether or no it actually 'meant' anything, I liked Ortrud's dispatching of the girl organist at

following pages Ortrud (Gabriele Schnaut) impedes the wedding procession of Elsa (Gun-Brit Barkmin) by stepping on her train. Photo Andreas Birkigt







top Lohengrin is acclaimed by the crowd, while Telramund attempts to suborn Elsa in Konwitschny's staging. Photo Andreas Birkigt

above Gottfried emerges from the ground with helmet and machine gun in the final tableau. Photo Andreas Birkigt

the end of the second act, so that she could assume the role for herself. Keen observation of the dynamics between individual members of the chorus heightens dramatic credibility.

The Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra was on excellent form: if not quite so traditional in sound as, say, the state orchestras of Berlin or Dresden, then still recognisably of that ilk, doubtless a consequence of East German shelter from international homogenisation. Gleaming strings from the first act Prelude continued to glow, while the third act's brass fanfares from around the theatre provided a magnificent yet frightening premonition of militarism: excitement, rejoicing, hubris and calamity. The Leipzig Opera Chorus was equally impressive, solidly prepared by Sören Eckhoff and well directed onstage. Ulf Schirmer's conducting did not draw attention to itself, yet it was a signal achievement to serve both score and production with no apparent discrepancy. Such could only result from thorough grounding in this challengingly transitional score – how far to 'music drama'? – and an ability to communicate that understanding.

Stefan Vinke, whom I had previously admired in Leipzig Opera's production of *Parsifal*, proved an excellent Lohengrin. If Klaus Florian Vogt remains *hors concours* among contemporary exponents, Vinke stands closer to traditional expectations. Initially, I wondered whether he might prove a little too baritonal, but fine command of line and tone put paid to such concerns. I should be keen to hear his *Rienzi*, another of his Leipzig roles. As Telramund, Hans-Joachim Ketelsen struck the right balance – shifting, as it must – between confidence and insecurity, the latter dramatically rather than technically speaking. Gun-Brit Barkmin, however, was a variable Elsa. Despite occasions when she attained a radiant lyricism, she audibly struggled elsewhere. Moreover, she lacked the purity of tone the role really demands – arguably less of a problem in this production than it would have been in many others. Then there was Gabriele Schnaut, a late replacement for Susan Maclean, who was still due to sing Ortrud for subsequent performances. Schnaut can act, and threw her all into the role, yet her vibrato is now so all-encompassing that pitch was often highly uncertain – or plain wrong. I was disappointed by the King Henry of James Moellenhoff, recently an impressive Hagen at Covent Garden; his voice seemed to have been sapped.

Still, even when singing did not match orchestra and production, it barely detracted from an extremely powerful dramatic experience. Konwitschny's tenure in Leipzig bids fair to court controversy and acclaim, with good reason for both.

